

The American Hemisphere and the Arab World. Introduction

Yo lo vi en su memoria. Había cumplido 21 años la última semana de enero, y era esbelto y pálido, y tenía los párpados árabes y los cabellos rizados de su padre. Era el hijo único de un matrimonio de conveniencia que no tuvo un solo instante de felicidad, pero él parecía feliz con su padre hasta que éste murió de repente, tres años antes, y siguió pareciéndolo con la madre solitaria hasta el lunes de su muerte. De ella heredó el instinto. De su padre aprendió desde muy niño el dominio de las armas de fuego, el amor por los caballos y la maestría de las aves de presas altas, pero de él aprendió también las buenas artes del valor y la prudencia. Hablaban en árabe entre ellos, pero no delante de Plácida Linero para que no se sintiera excluida (García Márquez 1981: 15-16).¹

The young man described here is Santiago Nasar, the murder victim in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (1981) by the Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez and possibly the best-known Latin-American Arab in world literature.

Between 1860 and 1914, quite a few Levantine immigrants arrived in the U.S.A. and Canada, but also in Latin America, Australia and, to a lesser degree, West Africa.² In famous novels by authors like Gabriel García Márquez or Milton Hatoum, we might find typical figures of Levantine traders – “Turcos”, as they are usually called, even if only few of them were Turkish, but rather Middle Eastern inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire.³ Arab immigration to Latin America

1 “I saw him in her memory. He had turned twenty-one the last week in January, and he was slim and pale and had his father’s Arab eyelids and curly hair. From his father he learned at a very early age the manipulation of firearms, his love for horses, and the mastery of high-flying birds of prey, but from him he also learned the good arts of valor and prudence. They spoke Arabic between themselves, but not in front of Plácida Linero, so that she wouldn’t feel excluded.”

2 Detailed references for the early Southern Mahjar (Exile) can be found in Anna Akasoy, “Exile and Alienation in the Poetry of the Early Southern Mahjar” in this volume.

3 See in this volume Dieter Ingenschay’s article on Milton Hatoum and Juan Goytisolo “Between the Boom and the Arabesque. ‘Hemispheric Writing’ in Juan Goytisolo’s *Paisajes después de la batalla* and Milton Hatoum’s *Relato de un cierto Oriente*”.

and the U.S.A. began at roughly the same time, but while immigration to the U.S.A. has increased tremendously over the last 150 years, in South America it began to decline after 1960.

After a long process of emancipation and recognition, authors of Arab descent are now entering the North, Middle and South American mainstream.⁴ Although earlier generations of writers drew on the traditional Arab canon of aesthetics (and contexts, often in the Arabic language), third- or fourth-generation immigrant writers have forged new paths between Arab and American literary traditions. After the unexpected and overwhelming international success of the Lebanese poet Gibran Khalil Gibran, who was one of the pioneers of ArabAmerican literature written in English in the early decades of the twentieth century, four decades of a rather shadowy existence of Arab American literature in different parts of the Americas were to follow.

It was not before the 1980s that Arab immigrants and their children and grandchildren started to be perceived in the American public sphere as a more or less homogeneous group having a common cultural background and profile. In the mid-1980s, D. H. Melhem organized the first ArabAmerican Poetry Reading at the Modern Language Association (1984) in the U.S. This event, together with the publication of Gregory Orfalea's and Sharif Elmusa's anthology in 1988 (Orfalea/Elmusa 1988), helped in connecting Arabic narrative traditions with the (US-)American literary canon and thus leveraged a new Arab American self-esteem. Internationally acknowledged authors like Samuel J. Hazo, Etel Adnan, Milton Hatoum or Naomi Shihab Nye play an important part as role models in promoting integration in the ArabAmerican communities. Since the 1990s, various literary anthologies have been published,⁵ and journals like *al-Jadīd: A Review and Record of Arab Culture and Art* (1995) and *Mizna. Prose, Poetry and Art Exploring Arab America* (1998) act as important mediators for ArabAmerican voices.

4 For a more detailed survey of recent developments in the U.S., cf. Lisa Suhair Majaj's article in this volume: "New Directions: ArabAmerican Writing Today"; a survey of Lebanese migration to the Americas is given in this volume in Luis Fayad, "Lebanese Migration to the Americas".

5 Cf. publications like Kadi (1994), Suleiman (1999), Hall/Hall (1999), Kaldas/Mattawa (2004).

By the end of the 1990s an anthology of ArabAmerican creative and critical writing, co-edited by the Syrian Munir Akash and the Libyan Khaled Mattawa, both of whom moved to the U.S.A. several decades ago, was published by Syracuse University Press (Akash/Mattawa 1999). In this anthology, different genres, like memoirs, diaries and journals, as well as poetry, drama, excerpts from novels and short fiction are gathered. The authors are Arabs having moved to the U.S. as immigrants as well as Americans of Arab origin; but the highly interesting concept of this anthology includes also American authors of non-Arab origin, like the US poet Daniel Moore, author of *Ramadan Sonnets*, or Penny Johnson, who has been living in Palestine and is engaged in Women's Studies and Human Rights issues – American authors who have come to be strongly involved in Arab culture and literature in their writing.⁶

The anthology *Post Gibran* has been judged by one of the leading contemporary Arab poets, the Palestinian Maḥmūd Darwīsh, as a lesson to 'exiles' in the broadest sense of the term, "to find creative grassroots in their country of exile". The literary critic and editor of the literary journal *Alif*, Ferial Ghazoul (American University of Cairo), enthusiastically praised the innovative potential of these 'creative grassroots' in the new ArabAmerican space of literary activity. Ghazoul points in her review of this publication to the innovative potential of this emerging, transnational, syncretic and self-confident ArabAmerican literature:

What is refreshing and striking in these essays is their acknowledgement of the past and the present and their orientation towards the future, determined to have a place of their own in the new world. There is not a sense of nostalgia for the past and for the homeland, as is often witnessed in the writing of the Mahjar⁷ poet, nor is it the total rejection of the new culture while cocooning oneself in traditional values, as Arabs with a ghetto mentality have done. In opposition these new voices call for forging a conscience of the Arab stream in American culture, not only to preserve a static identity, but also to call on one's heritage to contribute to, and upgrade, the dynamic combination of cultural strands in the adopted country (Ghazoul 2000).

6 Nathalie Handal treats these questions in her article "Our Roots in the Mezze: The Politics of Food and Arab-American Women Poets" in this volume.

7 North- and South-American exile, note of the editors.

In an approach coming in some respects quite close to *Post Gibrán's* concept, the anthology "ArabAmericas – the American Hemisphere and the Arab World" focuses on North and South American literatures that have no fixed abode. Looking beyond European categories of fixed identities and transcending the concept of nations as patched-together collectives, this anthology will seek alternatives amidst trans-regionally constituted cultures. The authors are interested in transitions, overlaps and movement – elements of cultural mobility that, in our view, are highly relevant for the emerging literatures of the world. Such processes can best be studied in biographies that are not tied to one place and in literary works that have not emerged from a single (linguistic) community.

In this collective volume, we want to reverse the traditional perspective of literary scholarship: for research purposes the various contributors will view the "norm" – i.e. classifiable, uniform and standardized literary works – as the exception. The authors intend to take seriously the often-cited examples of "cultural hybridity", that is, to attempt to grasp them on the basis of the conditions that lead to their emergence, instead of relying on those examples of the prevailing discourse.

The Arabic vernacular spoken by immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th century, the Creole languages in the Caribbean, and the Portuguese spoken by slaves in Brazil – all have demonstrated their relevance in everyday and theoretical application beyond the boundaries of standardized national languages in the context of globally entangled histories that result from different periods of accelerated globalization.

Concretely, we will make "Arab-American" literatures the subject of study in all their diversity. This volume's goal is not to illustrate and analyze (i.e. dissect) the elements of these literatures (Arabic, Anglo, Hispano, Luso and Francophone), but rather to concentrate on the (added) value of what is often looked down upon as a hodgepodge. Since these literatures have been undergoing significant and increasing changes, the methods, readings and interpretative approaches developed over the years cannot be taken as fixed constants and applied without further questioning. Categories such as "national literature" or "world literature" are only effective to a limited degree and in specific

contexts. Our goal is to search for adequate intellectual categories, the “in between” and the crossovers of national and world literature.⁸

In an interview, the Hungarian author Imre Kertész pointed at the questionable value of the conventional notions of ‘home’, ‘native country’ or ‘national identity’:

I am a stranger in this world. But this is not a problem at all. As I won’t have the right but to claim my strangeness down on earth and in heaven, this hopefully is my right. At home? Native country? – Once upon a time we maybe could speak about all of this in completely different terms, or we did not speak about it at all. Maybe one day somebody will grasp that these are nothing but abstract terms and that the only thing we really need in our life is just a place fit to live in. I have been feeling this for a long time.

The notion of “being or feeling like a stranger” as the essential category of an artist’s or a writer’s life, was one of the key notions that have been discussed in the first colloquium on “ArabAmericas” during a conference held by the Working Group “Ways of Knowledge: Transregional Studies” at the Institute for Advanced Study at Berlin (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin; conveners: Ottmar Ette, Friederike Pannewick, Andreas Pflitsch) in December 2004.

During this colloquium, as well as during a series of lectures held under the title “ArabAmericas – Transatlantic Constructions” at the University of Potsdam, the Humboldt University Berlin, the Latin American Institute at Freie Universität Berlin and the Ibero-American Institute Prussian Heritage Foundation during the spring term of 2005,⁹ we debated questions such as: Is it really special for writers with a so-called “double or multiple identity” to feel at home at more than one place in the world, or **not** to feel at home anywhere at all? What does it mean to feel at home? Is “home” a category of place, or rather an intellectual category? Do we have to deal with the category of “transcendental homelessness” instead? During the vivid debates at

8 This volume’s article “Literatures without a Fixed Abode. Figures of Vectorial Imagination beyond the Dichotomies of National and World Literature” by Ottmar Ette deals with this subject. See also in this volume the article by Roland Spiller “Dangerous liaisons: Transatlantic multilingualism in Latin American and Maghreb literature”. For more details, see also Ette (2005).

9 The first two lecture series were dedicated to “The power of Borders/the Borders of Power” and “Hemispheric Constructions of the Americas”. See Braig/Ette/Ingenschay/Maihold (2005; 2006); see also the two dossiers in *Iberoamericana* (Braig/Ette 2004; 2005).

this first meeting and the following lectures organized by “Forschungsverbund Lateinamerika Berlin-Brandenburg”, the participants were discussing central issues of literatures with no fixed abode in the context of the current period of accelerated globalization, debates that have deeply marked their contributions to the present book.

This first colloquium, which (together with the lecture series) was followed up in June 2005 under the title “ArabAmericas – Transatlantic” (conveners: Friederike Pannewick, Ottmar Ette), was held in the context of a research project called “Cultural Mobility in Near Eastern Literatures”. This project, initiated in 2001, has since then been part of the Institute for Advanced Study’s Working Group “Modernity and Islam”, and it also contributes some of its activities to the recently founded Research Network “Ways of Knowledge” (Wege des Wissens), based at the Institute for Advanced Study as well.¹⁰

The main focus in all these activities at the Institute for Advanced Study is on the diverse processes of transfer, exchange and interaction between the literatures of the Near East and other world literatures.¹¹ What we dealt with in these meetings was to try to cope with movement, as movement is indispensable and crucial for mobility. Mobility is a constituent component of culture. Cultures are inescapably and constantly in motion through time and space. This fact opens cultures up to the unforeseeable, which is the principal attribute of movement.

In the project “Cultural Mobility in Near Eastern Literatures”, including researchers coming from different national philologies inside and outside Europe, we observe and discuss phenomena of mobility in Arabian, Persian and Turkish literatures. In the second step, we always ask: what about these phenomena in other literatures of the world? With good reason we do not confine our research to the traditional perspective of East-West or South-North relations. We care much about South-South relations – for instance African, or in the current case Latin American and Arab literary entanglements –, and

¹⁰ Cf. <<http://www.wiko-berlin.de/projects/>>.

¹¹ Some of the main aims and concepts of the “Cultural Mobility” work group will be transferred to the transdisciplinary international research network called “Travelling Traditions – Comparative Perspectives on Middle Eastern Literatures”, that is located within the working group “Europe in the Middle East – the Middle East in Europe” at the Institute for Advanced Study at Berlin (2006-2011; cf. <<http://www.wiko-berlin.de/projects/>>).

we try to avoid unilateral perspectives as much as possible. The work in this project is demanding in a double sense: it is daring and innovative, but sometimes it is also quite tiring and seems to try the impossible. To study the restless movements in literatures of the world means having to cope with a constant interpretational suspense.

In this context, we were happy that we could convince four very interesting authors to participate in our first meeting in December 2005: Two of them, Verónica Murguía and Elias Khoury, live more or less in their native country (Elias Khoury is Visiting Professor of Comparative Literature at New York University in spring terms and edits the cultural supplement of Lebanon's daily newspaper *al-Nahār* during the rest of the year in Beirut). Both are deeply inspired in their literary work by other world literatures: the Mexican writer Verónica Murguía uses story-telling techniques of *The Arabian Nights* and reflects upon the biographies of famous Arab poets in some of her short stories,¹² whereas Elias Khoury, one of the leading novelists and journalists of Lebanon whose novels have been translated into nearly all European languages, loves to play transareal games with Latin American literature. In one of his novels, Khoury traces back the biography of García Márquez' Lebanese protagonists to their life in Lebanon before their immigration to Latin America by integrating these Arab American figures into his own novels which deal with recent Lebanese history.¹³

The other two artists are well-known authors in their societies, in Brazil and Latin America, as well as in the United States. Alberto Mussa was born in a family of Lebanese and Palestinian origin in Rio de Janeiro and lives in Brazil, where he studied Tupi, the language of the Brazilian natives, some African languages and Arabic. Alberto Mussa grew up in Brasília without learning any Arabic; as a student he felt the urgent need to learn more about the culture of his forefathers. This is why Alberto Mussa studied Arabic and then started to translate classical Arabic poetry into Portuguese. And it was during this work of cultural mobility that this ArabAmerican writer felt for

12 See her article in this volume, "My Unknown Forefathers".

13 For cross-references between Gabriel García Márquez and the Lebanese author Elias Khoury, cf. Ottmar Ette, "Chronicle of a Clash Foretold? ArabAmerican Dimensions and Transareal Relations in Gabriel García Márquez and Elias Khoury" in this volume. See also Elias Khoury's essay "Literature and Emigration".

the first time in his life “at home”: the moment he translated this poetry written some hundred years ago by his Arabic ancestors into his mother tongue Portuguese. So, the act of trans-lation, of trans-action, became a kind of identity building.¹⁴

Rabih Alameddine, an internationally acclaimed painter and novel writer, grew up in Kuwait and spent the summers in Lebanon on a regular basis. As a teenager, when the Civil War started in Lebanon, he was forced to leave the country and went to school in England. Then, as a sixteen year old boy, he moved finally to the U.S. Until now he has published three novels in English. In his first novel *Koolaid's. The Art of War* the narrator utters a wonderful phrase that says much about the existential state of being that applies to quite a few of the authors represented and dealt with in the anthology *Arab Americas*: “In America, I fit, but I do not belong. In Lebanon, I belong, but I do not fit.”¹⁵

At the second workshop held in Berlin in June 2005, five creative writers, literary critics and researchers from Mexico, the U.S.A., Argentina, Colombia and Germany followed the invitation of the Institute for Advanced Study at Berlin. Among them was Alberto Ruy Sánchez from Mexico. While living in Paris for almost a decade, he came under the influence of Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Rancière and began to work as a writer and editor. In the mid-1980s, Ruy Sánchez worked as an editorial journalist for the famous magazine *Vuelta*, founded by Octavio Paz. Since 1988 he has been the Chief Editor and Founding Publisher of Latin America's leading art magazine, *Artes de México*. His books have won numerous awards and have been translated into various languages, including French and Arabic. Ruy Sánchez links elements of magic realism with Arabic mysticism, invoking a sensual and spiritual mood in everyday Islamic life. In his prose, Ruy Sánchez aims to reconstruct the Arabic roots of Hispanic and Hispano-American culture.¹⁶

An American-Palestinian perspective entered this workshop's debates through Lisa Suhair Majaj and Nathalie Handal. Lisa Suhair

14 His text “Who Is Facing the Mirror?” in this volume tells this personal story.

15 Cf. Andreas Pflitsch, “To Fit or not to Fit. Rabih Alameddine's Novels *Koolaid's* and *I, the Divine*” in this volume.

16 His essay in this volume, “The Nine Gifts that Morocco Gave Me”, is an account of this relation.

Majaj was born in the U.S.A. to a Palestinian father and a U.S.-American mother. She grew up in Jordan and studied at the University of Beirut. After the evacuation out of Lebanon in the summer of 1982 during the Israeli invasion, she subsequently moved to the United States to continue her education. She has been living in Cyprus since 2001.

For contemporary Palestinian authors in the West, the expulsion from their homeland resulted in physical dislocation as well as linguistic, generational and cultural differences with writers in the Middle East. ArabAmerican authors are addressing the need to translate their configurations of identity into language, and this language is usually English. Lisa Suhair Majaj extensively studied the ArabAmerican literature in her PhD thesis at the University of Michigan; her poetry, essays and book reviews have been published in a variety of international journals and anthologies. According to Lisa Suhair Majaj, the new generation is trying to create an ArabAmerican literary space and genre that places their Arab heritage in an American context.

The question of having different options for national and cultural belonging is also a crucial issue in the scientific and literary writings of Nathalie Handal. Having Palestinian parents and being raised in Paris, Boston, the West Indies and Latin America can make ethnicity a complex question, explains poet Nathalie Handal: "I feel I'm a Bostonian Parisian" she said in a broadcast interview, noting that she had most recently lived in London and now calls New York City her home. Nathalie Handal reflected in this radio talk on the different layers of cultural perception; she explained that Arabs often consider her an American since she writes in English and does not speak fluent Arabic. On the other hand, Americans, when they learn about her background, consider her an Arab. But in Handal's perception, an Arab is anyone of Arab descent who chooses that label. Nathalie Handal also lamented the confusion many Americans from the U.S. display about the rest of the world. When she tells people that her family comes from Bethlehem, she said they may respond, "'Bethlehem, – Pennsylvania?' I'd say, 'Palestine', and they'd say, 'Oh, Pakistan'. It's amazing".

Poet, playwright, writer, editor, critic and literary activist, Nathalie Handal is the editor of *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary*

Anthology (Handal 2001), an Academy of American Poets bestseller and winner of the Pen Oakland/Josephine Miles Award. Handal is presently editing two anthologies that might be interesting for research in our field, namely Dominican Literature and ArabAmerican Literature, and co-editing along with Tina Chang and Ravi Shankar, *Risen from East: An Anthology of South Asian, East Asian and Middle Eastern Poets*.

Originally from Bogotá, Colombia, the writer Luis Fayad joined the second ArabAmerican meeting in Berlin in June 2005. Within the group of Colombian writers who began to publish their books in the middle of the publishing boom of Gabriel García Márquez, Luis Fayad occupies a central place. Luis Fayad was born in Bogotá, but he spent most of his life outside Colombia, living in Paris, Barcelona, and finally Berlin. The grandparents of this author emigrated from Lebanon to Colombia, but while his parents still learnt to speak Arabic, he did not. He had to leave Colombia and come to Berlin to start learning Arabic in Germany ...

Some fascinating insights into the world of Argentinean-Syrian cultural entanglements have been contributed by Susana Romano Sued from Córdoba, Argentina.¹⁷ Born as a daughter of a Syrian mother and an Argentinean father, Susana Romano Sued, due to the dictatorship in Argentina, settled in Germany, where she got her PhD with a thesis on the poetry of Gottfried Benn and the translations of his work into Spanish. Back in Argentina, she dealt abundantly with the inheritance and traditional customs of the Argentinean Middle East in her outstanding poetic and literary texts.

This volume is – as already mentioned above – based on contributions made during two workshops at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Berlin and a lecture series at various research institutions and universities in Berlin-Brandenburg. These contributions were made by researchers in Romance and Middle Eastern Studies, by journalists and creative writers. This volume intends to keep the lively and highly stimulating atmosphere during these cross-cultural and multilingual meetings. This is why academic studies elaborated in *ArabAmericas* will be found side by side with more personal statements based on

17 See her article “The Castilian Language, a Mosaic of Languages: An Exercise of the Memory as a Genealogy and Archaeology of Culture” in this volume.

individual memories and experience. This consciously chosen open structure has also been considered most appropriate regarding the system of transcribing Arab proper names and technical terms in Latin script. As many proper names of Arab descent started to lead an independent existence in between different national communities throughout the decades, it would have been rather artificial and far off every day's transcultural practice to re-transcribe them back to their linguistic roots. Therefore, we did not try to standardize the transcription system in the various articles of this volume. Consistency is to be found only within each single article, not in the anthology as a whole.

We would like to express our gratitude to the Institute for Advanced Study at Berlin, the Ibero-American Institute Prussian Heritage Foundation, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Forschungsverbund Lateinamerika Berlin-Brandenburg and the University of Potsdam for funds and travel grants. Our special thanks go to Felicitas Hentschke and Christine Hofmann (Berlin) as well as to Gabriele Penquitt, Ulrike Zieger, Marcel Vejmelka and Mark Mines (Potsdam) for invaluable help and good spirits.

The Editors

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